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## A STUDY OF SHELLEY'S "PROMETHEUS UNBOUND."

It is the purpose of this essay to help, though ever so little, to the clearer comprehension of the thought underlying Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound." The poet has expressed his theory of human progress in language of such ethereal elusiveness that it escapes more or less the intellectual grasp. Yet clearly an understanding of the thought is essential to the appreciation of the poet's distinctive art, expression.

In the following the attempt is made to arrive at an understanding of "Prometheus Unbound:" (1) by an interpretation of the drama in the light of the rest of the poet's work; and (2) by a comparison between it and Goethe's "Faust," with a view to defining further Shelley's thought by differentiating it from its antithesis.

### I. AN INTERPRETATION.

When Saturn ruled the universe man lived a life of calm joy as the flowers do now before the wind or sun has withered them. But the God denied man his birthright—consciousness and all that it involves, freedom, reason, emotion.

This Saturnian existence—serene but lethargic—came to an end when Prometheus gave the government of the world to Jupiter with this command: "Let man be free." Thus mankind was endowed with consciousness and volition. But the new ruler, Jupiter, was malicious: he brought famine, toil, pain, terror, madness, crime, remorse, self-contempt—the whole train of evil—into the world. Prometheus, seeing earth thus Heaven-oppressed, in pity waked hope and love in man, and gave him as alleviations to his state art, knowledge, and control over physical forces.

For these services to mankind, Prometheus was bound,

at Jupiter's command, to Mount Caucasus. There we see him at the opening of Shelley's poem. He has been hanging there for ages of sleep-unsheltered hours, suffering every torture which the cruelty of Jove can devise. The Furies torment him with visions of suffering mankind: now he sees the gentlest Nazarene crucified; and now he hears the spirit of this Christ wailing for the faith he kindled, for the gospel of love which has been perverted into an anathema. The Titan agonizes under the implied reproach. He realizes that he is responsible for human suffering in that he aroused humanity from the Saturnian state of unconsciousness and wakened clear knowledge for man:

Then was kindled within him a thirst which outran  
Those perishing waters; a thirst of fierce fever,  
Hope, love, doubt, desire, which consume him forever.

The Furies exult at the anguish of Prometheus:

Past ages crowd on thee; but each one remembers,  
And the future is dark, and the present is spread  
Like a pillow of thorns for thy slumberless head.

But though the future is dark, it is not quite hidden from the Titan. He does not know, indeed, the term of Jupiter's tyranny; but this he knows, that the hour will come when there will be an end. Moreover, Prometheus alone discerns the instrument whereby the Father of Evil is destined to be overthrown: a child will be born to Jupiter who will dethrone his father, for evil begets its own destruction. This is the secret, the revelation of which would procure for Prometheus reconciliation with Jupiter and release from torture. But he chooses rather to endure the unspeakable anguish, since the revelation of the secret would obviate the downfall of the Tyrant and so condemn mankind to eternal slavery under dominant Evil.

Thus unsubmitively the Champion of humanity suffers his woes. Suddenly he transcends them, with one leap attaining the height of his being. For whereas hitherto, blind with grief, he has hated his tormentor, now love wells up in his heart for the Tyrant. He pities Jupiter because the day of his doom must come:

What ruin

Will hunt thee undefended thro' the wide Heaven!  
 . . . I speak in grief,  
 Not exultation, for I hate no more,  
 As then ere misery made me wise.

Although Prometheus vaguely apprehends that now "Heaven can torment no more," yet he does not realize that the day of doom is actually at hand. He does not know that the moment he pitied Jupiter, thus making the sphere of his love absolutely all-inclusive, that moment the ruin of the Tyrant was initiated. Yet so it is. Only through Love can mankind be saved ultimately:

Most vain all hope but love.—*Act I.*

Fate, time, occasion, chance, and change—to these  
 All things are subject but eternal Love.—*Act II., iv.*

In "Queen Mab" the same principle is expressed when the initiation of the millennial period is called "the morn of love" (IX.). And in "The Revolt of Islam" it is shown operative: there we see

a nation  
 Made free by love.—*Canto V., xiv. 3.*

Love, then, the saving principle, is at work. The process has been set afoot which is to culminate in the emancipation of humanity through the dethronement of Jupiter by his offspring.

The immediate effect of the consummation of Love in Prometheus is to initiate his reunion with Asia, his beloved, from whom he has been separated during the years of his torture on Caucasus—years during which Prometheus, blind with grief, hated the Tyrant. That is, Mankind (Prometheus), omnipotent through perfected Love, begins to actualize its Ideal (Asia).

Harmonizing this earth with what we feel above.—*Act II., v.*

Asia is one of the most elusive of Shelley's conceptions. With most delicate art the poet in mystic language vaguely shadows forth her meaning. She is the "lamp of earth," the

light of life,  
 Shadow of beauty unbeheld.—*Act III., iii.*

Prometheus drinks life from her loved eyes. By his soul she lives; and her transforming presence would fade if it were not mingled with his.

Such subtle language requires the illumination which, fortunately for us, flows abundantly from the rest of Shelley's work. Comment on Asia can be found in all of his greater poems, for the shadow of Asia early fell upon him:

Sudden, thy shadow fell on me;  
I shrieked, and clasped my hands in ecstasy!  
  
I vowed that I would dedicate my powers  
To thee and thine—have I not kept the vow?  
With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now  
I call the phantoms of a thousand hours  
Each from his voiceless grave: they have in visioned bowers  
Of studious zeal or love's delight  
Outwatched with me the envious night—  
They know that never joy illumed my brow  
Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free  
This world from its dark slavery,  
That thou, O awful Loveliness,  
Wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express.  
—*Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, v., vi.

So in "Alastor" the veiled maid whom the youth has seen in vision, and in pursuit of whom he dies, is again Asia: "Her voice was like the voice of his own soul"—that is, she was his soul's ideal objectified. Again in "Epipsychidion" the poet expands his conception of Asia:

Seraph of Heaven! . . .  
Veiling beneath that radiant form of Woman  
All that is insupportable in thee  
Of light, and love, and immortality!  
. . . . .  
Veiled glory of this lampless Universe!  
. . . . .  
Thou Wonder, and thou Beauty, and thou Terror!  
Thou Harmony of Nature's art!  
. . . . .  
The glory of her being . . .  
. . . one intense  
Diffusion, one serene Omnipresence,  
Whose flowing outlines mingle in their flowing  
. . . . .

Till they are lost, and in that Beauty furl'd  
Which penetrates and clasps and fills the world;  
Scarce visible from extreme Loveliness.

—*Epipsychidion*.

In the light of these clearer statements, the mystic descriptions of Asia in "Prometheus Unbound" reveal their hidden wealth of significance. Asia is the Ideal of Life, Beauty, Nature: she is All that mankind has ever hoped for or longed for or loved. And now that Humanity is purged of all hatred, now that it is potent through love, this Ideal is moving to meet it: Asia leaves her far Indian vale to go to commingle with Prometheus.

That Asia's activity is not accidental, but the inevitable response to the change in Prometheus, is indicated unmistakably by the personification of Necessity or Destiny as Demogorgon, who, through his ministers, the Echoes, draws her to his cave whence the destined hour will bear her to Prometheus. Referring to the path of Asia to Demogorgon's cave, the spirits sing:

There those enchanted eddies play  
Of echoes, music-tongued, which draw,  
By Demogorgon's mighty law.  
.  
.  
.  
And first there comes a gentle sound  
To those in talk or slumber bound,  
And wakes the destined. Soft emotion  
Attracts, impels them: those who saw  
Say from the breathing earth behind  
There steams a plume-uplifting wind  
Which drives them on their path, while they  
Believe their own swift wings and feet  
The sweet desires within obey.—*Act II., ii.*

On the way to the cave of Destiny the Echoes sing to Asia, stating her connection with the next link in the concatenation of events which constitutes the process of the liberation of mankind:

In the world unknown  
Sleeps a voice unspoken;  
By thy step alone  
Can its rest be broken.—*Act II., i.*

This "voice unspoken" is the child of Jupiter, who is destined to dethrone his father. He exists already, but "unbodied." Jupiter is eagerly expecting the incarnation of this child, not knowing that it is his Doom, but believing that through it mankind will be finally subdued, for thus far man has suffered indeed, but without submission. Through the step of Asia the sleeping voice will awaken, through Asia Demogorgon (Destiny) will unloose through life's portal the snake-like Doom coiled underneath his throne.

Asia descends, then,

Through the gray void abysm,  
Down, down!

to the realm of Demogorgon. This realm was described by Shelley, though in somewhat different imagery, in "Queen Mab," where the poet leads us to "the cradles of Eternity."

Once Asia is within that cave whence Destiny loosens the Hours, once she is ready to depart thence to be united with Prometheus—the child of Jupiter, his Doom, can be incarnated. For the downfall of Evil must precede the actualization of Man's Ideal. The Doom of Jupiter is, of course, a manifestation of Destiny; and so in the shape of Demogorgon the fatal child appears to his father. The destiny, the doom which Jupiter begot, this, his offspring, hurls him from high heaven into the abyss.

In thus representing Jove as begetting his own ruin, Shelley expresses his belief that evil is self-destructive. So in "Queen Mab" he described Evil as "done by her own venomous sting to death" (IX.). And in "The Revolt of Islam" the bloodless overthrow of tyranny follows an attempt on the part of the tyrant to crush the nation completely.

Now that Jupiter has fallen, Prometheus is unbound, and he and Asia are united. Mankind sees its Ideal realized. The millennium has arrived.

## II. A COMPARISON WITH GOETHE'S "FAUST."

Shelley's poem, it has been shown, assumes three stages of existence: (1) the Saturnian, of unconscious vegetable

life; (2) the Jovian, of conscious existence into which evil has been introduced; (3) the Promethean, of conscious joy, an existence which has cast off evil. The first is the stage of rest; the second, that of conflict; and the third, that of attainment.

Shelley and Goethe both regard the Jovian period of struggle in which we live as differentiated from the Saturnian period of rest by the possession of consciousness. In the Saturnian existence there is no suffering; suffering begins with consciousness and what it involves, reason, emotion, will. Three theories of life proceed from this point of departure: (1) the theory held in common by the Mephistopheles of Goethe and the Furies of Shelley, (2) Shelley's, and (3) Goethe's theory.

A few words will suffice for the first of these. Mephistopheles and the Furies conclude that the Saturnian is better than the Jovian age. The painless unconscious existence is preferable to the conscious life which is attended by suffering. Thus Mephistopheles finds fault with God for having endowed man with reason which makes him aspire and suffer; the Furies taunt Prometheus likewise.

This cynical attitude contrasts with the optimistic views of the poets. Shelley held that, although evil cannot exist before there is consciousness, yet it is not bound up with consciousness. It is adventitious. It has no function in life. It simply impedes progress. Evil has come into life from without, and man can and will shake off evil. The Jovian stage is accordingly preferable to the Saturnian because it is potentially the Promethean; and conscious joy is, of course, better than unconscious rest.

Goethe agreed with Shelley that man's life of conflict is not inferior to the serene, Saturnian, vegetable existence. But, unlike Shelley, he affirmed that the Jovian stage is good in itself. Goethe believed that the suffering and error which coexist with consciousness are not adventitious but essential. Man's distinctive goodness lies in striving, and as long as he strives he errs. Thus sin is a condition of progress; far from being useless, it is functional, creative of good.



Goethe, therefore, does not look forward to a sinless millennium. He pictures the Promethean period as a mere illusion, an unattainable end toward which man strives, the divine. Accordingly Faust, the typical man, dies still straining forward toward this ideal. It is the struggle that interests Goethe. Unaspiring rest is good for the thing below man, and attainment is good for the thing above man; but for us, here and now, the best state is that of courageous striving.

The two poets, then, though both optimists, are antithetical. Goethe is interested in the process going on to-day; Shelley is distressed about the present—his interest is in the millennial attainment. Goethe denies evil by showing that, in spite of itself, it creates good; Shelley denies evil by showing that it destroys itself ultimately.

In our day Goethe is generally regarded as the better theorist. This judgment, granting its truth, need not embarrass our enjoyment of Shelley's art. Goethe has given beautiful expression to what we to-day, rightly or wrongly, conceive to be the actual world. Shelley has given equally beautiful expression to what seems to us an imaginary, unreal world. It will redound only to our own æsthetic loss if we agree to appreciate Goethe's beautiful real world, but refuse to understand and imagine and enjoy the lovely ideal world which Shelley has created.

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